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BRIDGEPORT CHURCH AND
COMMUNITY



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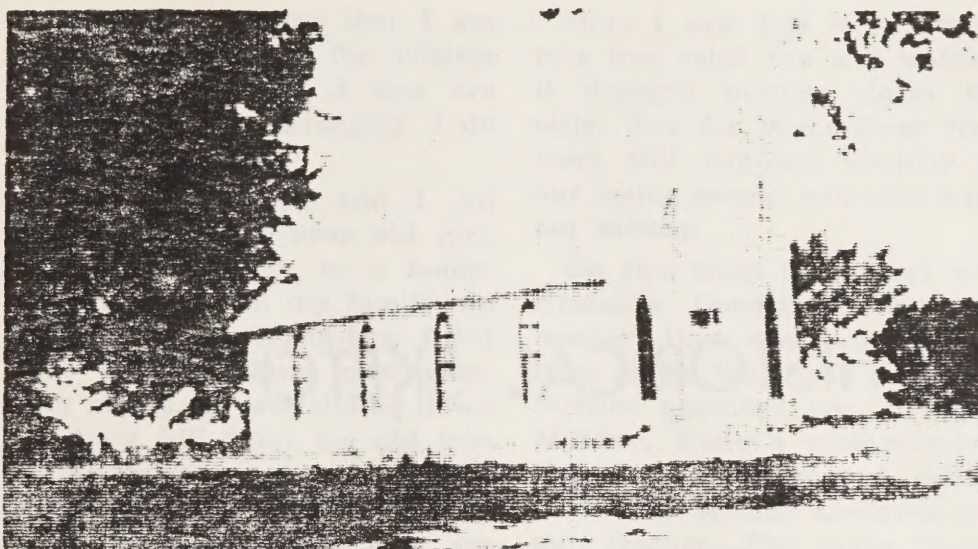
BY

VERNA PERRILL TODD

BRIDGEPORT
CHURCH
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The Bridgeport Church as it now stands

The Reverend Dcn Zook, Pastor



Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Crawford

Most instrumental in establishing the Bridgeport
Church during the year of 1886.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

of

The Beginning of the Bridgeport Church and Community

by

VERNA PERRILL TODD

This sketch was given on the occasion of the Golden Anniversary of the Methodist Church at Bridgeport, Kansas, October 7, 1962.

Because of continued requests for the material, it has been thought best to place it in this form. It is authentic to my best knowledge, though others may or may not see matters in the same light. The parenthesis in Miss Robb's letter were asides by me as I read. I have omitted many names specifically in the latter part of the sketch, for brevity.

Suddenly I realize that I am fast becoming one of the oldsters of this community. A few are older, not many. Strangely, I do not feel that way.

I close my eyes, and I am only a little four-year old girl, wrapped up cozily in a home-made sleigh, with my family, on blankets in a wagon-box filled with straw. Behind clop-clopping horses, we are sliding down the little hill from the old iron bridge to the road past the old Adams place (Gene Douglas' now). Through snowy mist, we glide through the long aisles of light, cast in the darkness from the windows of this church; light that has always seemed symbolic to me.

We turn west, past the old Morrison blacksmith shop, where the banked forge still faintly glows. In the distance, Swedish sleigh-bells sound, Carlsons' perhaps, few others had them, adding their charm, as we stop at the church with its story-book spire. There was no church bell.

The double doors opened to the glory of a beautiful cotton wrapped tree, as large as the whole alcove could accommodate. I think that the thrill of that sight has never been surpassed. What a Christmas eve! Here, after the singing of 'Joy to the World', we children did our part. Then the choir, filled with the wonderful voices which this community always was privileged to have, made us realize and understand even as children, the admonition that man's first duty is to 'Praise the Lord'.

Here I saw this same Christmas tree catch fire and watched it dragged burning down this aisle. Yet for years these trees were still wrapped lovingly by our young people, and used without mishap.

On this front row, I sat with Grandma Douglas as my first teacher. Back there, in front of huge stoves that stood where the furnace openings are, Grandma Millikin, Nancy's mother-in-law, taught us. We moved farther back, and Arthur Lindgren was our teacher. The place buzzed with other classes. Mrs. Adams or my father had the married peoples class. One or the other was usually Superintendent of the school, also.

I can see this room filled to standing room for great evangelistic meetings. Here, at this altar we consecrated our lives to Christ. Here we made our first communion, and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. Here, I was married. There have not been too many others. From here, I gave up my mother, my sister and my father, even as almost all of you have done.

Our joys were simple; picnics with baseball and races and games. Programs, box suppers, and always, the gatherings in the homes with music. In those days as now the life of the community was so commingled, that for each other's sorrow we all suffered. As children we lost a dear classmate, when she climbed on and fell beneath the wheel of the wagon driven by her brother for the cheese factory. This was

Nellie Comer. My Aunt Alice Lamer was taken, leaving four small children. "Why?" The mill came to a grinding halt in the dead of night and a young man our own age was snatched from our midst - Lee Wilson. During the flu epidemic, two processions moved at the same time one north, one south, through the horrible mud of those depressing weeks, when two eighth grade girls succumbed within twenty-four hours of each other. Another, later, with appendicitis.

These are only examples. I mention them, because through such trials we somehow kept our sense of proportion. We came to this church, we read and studied the Bible. Whether there was preaching or not and often there was not, there was Sunday-school and the deep fervent prayers of devout laymen. Always, there was song. Perhaps because we were from various churches, but met here on common ground, there was always here a kindly spirit. It was as though the motto was, "Whoso cometh in Spirit and in Truth I will in no wise cast out."

Can I show you the beginnings of this church? It was the era of high wheeled buggies, trotting horses and buckboards bad roads and either dust or mud. A two hour drive to Salina even in good weather. Fords on the rivers were common where bridges now are. The 1858 flood had washed out all the military crossings that had been here. The T.V. West-erns are not so far off as some say. It seemed to me, even in

the nineties, my father would rather ford than find a bridge. Life was like that in those days.

In examining the Saline County Atlas for 1884, I found some excerpts I think I should give, even if it sounds like Saline County I'm speaking about. I find The City of Salina Town Co. was organized March 30, 1859, incorporated in 1860. The men who organized this company were W. A. Phillips, president, A. M. Campbell, A. C. Spillman, James Muir, and Robert Crawford. A month later, W. and R. H. Bishop and R. Calkins.

The first church organized in Salina was Presbyterian, established May 12 1860. The first minister who served this church for six months, was Rev. A. A. Morrison, an itinerant preacher.

Robert Crawford, who was among the original organizers of Salina was my grandfather. His widowed mother came from Scotland with her family when my grandfather was ten years of age, first to Illinois, then to Kansas.

This first Presbyterian minister, Rev. A. A. Morrison, was my great grandfather, the father of Ermina Morrison who became Mrs. Robert Crawford.

In 1867, Kansas Pacific (Union Pacific), constructed to Salina, which immediately became a heavy cattle shipping point. The usual route for southwestern herds was from the west down the Smoky River, then north across a ford, and into Salina. This was an old Indian Crossing. Sometime before 1873 a grist mill was placed west of this

ford. Here the herds were held and watered, and a village sprang up.

In 1883-1884, the Union Pacific built a branch to McPherson. And when, soon after, the Missouri Pacific chose the route through this village for its main-line instead of through Salina, boom was in the air. Salina, still not large, started as a village. With so much in its favor, because of a better situation, Salina could be outdone. The floods changed all that later, but now a boom began. And because they were in such a hurry, the bridge, the iron bridge you all remember, was built by popular subscription instead of waiting for the county. The mill was rebuilt and fine screens added for white flour. A large hotel with a drug store and a saloon was added to the two general stores. Salina Mill and Elevator came in. There were two stations and shipping points. The town had been laid out and named Bridgeport. The first school-house in the vicinity was actually No. 14, on the northwest corner of the intersection of the road that leads to the cemetery across what is now 81.

Accordingly, the town was laid out to this road, thence south to the Bridge. A park was cleared just west of the bridge. One huge elm dominated this park. The town never built up to any extent north of the tracks. One lone poplar tree on the northwest of the highway still remains of a line of trees that marched down from the north

intersection, on the west side of Mainstreet.

If church services were held in the school they were few. Mostly they were held in the homes. With the building of No. 79 in Bridgeport, No. 14 was moved one mile north. It was seldom used as a church.

From Miss Susie Robb of Salina, I gained some pertinent material. Some of us went to school to her sister Mina Robb, and remember George Robb as state auditor for many years. Their home was east of what is now the Bailey place east of the Star school house road. At the time of which she speaks, my grandfather had sold his homestead which lay east of Santa Fe in Salina with Crawford Avenue as its southern boundary, and bought land south of Asaria, west of the river from what is now the Fred Cox place. Other Presbyterian families had settled east of the river near. I quote from Miss Robb's letter.

"The first church service in our community were in 1885, a Sunday School at Star school house with an occasional minister from Salina attending. Wm. Bishop was the first paid minister of the Presbyterian Church, and later a Rev. Simkins, who baptized me, and an early Methodist minister, Dr. Lockwood, who was much thought of by the Robinsons. Those attending and promoting the Sunday School were the Crawfords, the Rittgers, Robbs, Earharts, Ed and Roy Lamkin (who later married the oldest Crawford girl, Marian).

the Chichesters, who were related to the Lamkins, and Larry Lapsley, the colored man who lived north of Rittgers. The children of these people attended day school at Star. Mr. Crawford bought land east of the river just south of Bridgeport, and I am not sure just when they moved to it. The Roy Lamkins and the Chichesters chartered a car and left for Washington state. The Swedish families in those days did not speak English, and did not attend Sunday School, at least not at Star.

"As soon as the Crawfords moved to Bridgeport, through the efforts of Mrs. Crawford mainly, the church was built. I remember my father saying that the men of the community under the direction of a carpenter (which I think was Mr. Horning who built west of the church also) did the work, and that Mr. Earhart plastered the building. This Earhart lived in a stone house, south of Star and east of the road, out on the prairie. Sadly, he left his family, and they had a hard time, walking to Bridgeport for groceries, and carrying them home. She was a gifted seamstress, and finally moved to Salina, then to Kansas City.

"Bridgeport was quite a community in those days, and in the new church many were added to the service. The Mills, of the flour mill, Mrs. Mill's sisters the Phillips who built the house across from the church, later the Fagerberg home. The Hopkins, the Dunbars, the Cyrus Lamer family, the Jake Lamers, Wheel-

ers, Duncans, Morrisons, McPhails, Millikins. Later, your folks Harry and Addie (Crawford) Perrill, Fred and Maggie Stevens (who by the way, learned to play the organ from a keyboard painted on a box, and was organist a number of years). These, with Mrs. Adams carried on the work. There was a family named Brummit too, I remember. Frank Exstrand who had the drug store was at one time Sunday School superintendent. My sister Mina always said we never had a better teacher anytime anywhere than Maggie Stevens.

"Through the years, I must say that it was Harry Perrill who kept the Sunday School going. His work and influence could never be estimated or measured. Those early settlers had great courage and hope, also great difficulties. For us it was the long ride of eight miles, in cold and hot weather. I believe children suffered more than grown ups.

"I am not sure when the Bridgeport Church was built, probably by 1886. We were Irish, and my father's uncle, Sandy Robb of Belfast Ireland, sent money for the pulpit Bible used for so many years. The folks had written about the church. Incidentally, the Star church services were dropped when the church was built. I always supposed the church was outside the Presbytery, therefore no regular ministers. I remember a Rev. Ambrose from Roxbury . . ." so ends the quotations from Miss Robb's letter.

I want to state, before I go farther, that in my work away from this church I had the opportunity to observe many other early church buildings. I was always reminded of the excellence of the workmanship in this building, and the lovely pews here in comparison with others.

Besides Miss Robb's letter, I have a letter from Mr. Conrad Vandervelde of Emporia. He reports that the minutes of the Solomon Presbytery report "Enrolling Bridgeport Presbyterian Church April 1, 1886. It had been organized sometime before that date."

"On April 3, 1886, 'Application for aid in the erection of a house of worship by our church at Bridgeport to the amount of six hundred dollars, has been presented to the committee and we have recommended that five hundred be granted. They report fourteen hundred raised, and they expect the house to cost two thousand.'

"How soon the house was erected is not shown, probably not entirely completed before 1887. A minute of Oct. 28, 1890 says, 'Elder Mills made a statement in regard to a burden of debt resting on the Board of Trustees, and asking Presbytery to devise some means of assisting them to remove it. Presbytery decided to ask the Board of Church erection to appropriate \$100 for their relief.'

"We have no other records bearing on erection, completion, or dedication of the building. A minute of date April 10, 1912

states, "On motion, the Presbytery decided to disband the Presbyterian Church at Bridgeport, and grant the remaining members letters of dismissal as they may request, and that the Presbyterian Evangelist Rev. D. C. Smith be instructed to negotiate the sale of the property for not less than \$700'."

(signed) Conrad Vandervelde
Hist. Records Com.
Synod of Kansas

Roughly speaking, Bridgeport was linked with Roxbury through the 90s and early 1900. We were so linked at the time of disbanding.

Going back to the erection of the church, one might say it ushered in a time of well being, along with a desire to become a real city. Industries sprang up, farms were improved. The Crawfords by then lived in the house that now is the first south of the bridge, back in the trees at the corner. The house is essentially as they built it. There were no trees then, only straggly ones along the creek. The oak grove south, and the elms in front were all planted by my grandfather. Little trees abounded, but prairie fires and floods had kept down timber. Arbor day was observed by most schools and churches. I remember when my father was instrumental in planting the wisps of trees on the school house grounds. Hedge was planted for fencing on most farms.

Many of the earliest pioneers had the urge to move on. With the shifting of families and the natural adjustments that came

from marriages and deaths, the Presbyterian members declined, while Methodists arriving began to have the majority. Also Kansas Wesleyan University was established, and it was easier to get supply pastors from Salina than from Emporia, where the Presbyterian school was.

The Crawfords went to Stevens Co., where land was opening up, to help their large family to acquire homesteads. They went with the intention of returning. They never did, although after Mr. Crawford's death, Grandmother did live here for a time, with the orphaned Joslin children, her grandchildren; and her son Henry and family were here.

They left the farm in the hands of two sons-in-law, Will Lamer, and my father, Harry Perrill. Father was a Methodist, mother was a Presbyterian, as were her sister and her husband, Will Lamer. At about this time Will Lamer's parents moved to Chase County.

My father taught school at Bridgeport, for several years, in the late nineties. He had a great love for the pupils, many of whom were from Swedish families, either Mission or Lutheran. He understood their ancestry, and the reluctance of their parents to break with tradition. So the Non-Denominational or Union Sunday school came about. If the support of both churches was a drain I never heard him complain. Indeed, he loved the ministers of both churches, and all were welcome in our home.

For some time, services were

conducted every two weeks by each. The Presbyterians were linked with Roxbury, and the Methodists with Mentor and As-saria. I remember especially Dr. Lott, even visited in his home at Roxbury. When Mrs. Will Lamer died, his sister Katie (later Mrs. Sutcliffe) came. She was indefatigable in church work. In the following years, the Rittgers and the Robbs moved to Salina, the Duncans and others departed. I feel sure that the Presbyterian services were discontinued soon after Will Lamer left the farm, but that prior to that time there were quarterly conferences, and so some Methodist organization. Still the Sunday School was Union and the Methodists did not own the building.

One of our dearest and finest women was Mrs. Adams, Church of the Brethren. It came about that when a fifth Sunday occurred in the month, her church sent a supply, usually Rev. Brubaker. To my knowledge, no other churches ever held regular services here, certainly with any thought of cooperating. The Lutherans may have at some time had a few afternoon services in Swedish and did have a catechism class at the school house in the summers.

We learned to understand and accept the differences in the various denominations. Recently, a little girl who had not learned these differences, came home from school confused. She said to her mother, "I can't say the Lord's prayer anymore." Her grandmother, shocked, asked

why. "Because," said Bonnie, who had Presbyterian training, "I'm so messed up with the 'trespasses' that I don't know where I am!" (Aren't we all?)

We learned that Presbyterians said 'Debtors', the Methodists 'Trespasses'. The Presbyterians served communion at the pews, the Methodists came to the altar. We learned that the ladies in the little black bonnets always knelt when they prayed. Everyone was welcome. In some ways this was very detrimental, because too many people took without assuming any responsibility. But there were many who did assume it, and I would be very remiss if I did not pay tribute to those who worked so hard and faithfully. These were the people who were here in the years preceding the purchase of the church, by the Methodists, and through the years from 1912 through the twenties and early thirties. I salute the wonderful associations of those years.

There was a deep religious upsurge. The finances of the church were taken seriously. The difficulties were great but we surmounted them. We played together, we studied together, we worked together, we prayed together, and may I say we grew together.

A note from Myrtle Crawford, who lived here part of that time, expresses it better than I —

"I have so many memories of that little church, and the people who made it such a nice church home for me and mine. I have never found another to take its place. I am sure Grandmother Crawford told me of them, but I was too happy with the church as it was, to give much thought to the struggles the older ones had in establishing and maintaining it."

As especially instrumental in building the church conscience, I would mention especially the Reverends E. M. Chambers, Cecil Semans, Mark Smith and Dr. Eckland. There were of course others.

Let me close with this thought:
"If from this quiet place

Where first for us a spark
was kindled,

We each have gone, and from
That flame have sparked
within another

Somewhere, somehow, a deep
desire to seek

The rich fulfillment of a closer
walk with God —

Then still the radiance glows
from out these windows,
And none may say how far it
yet may shine."

V.P.T. 1962

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